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Socratic seminars : fostering an environment of critical thinking and self-confidence in the classroom

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ABSTRACT

This action research investigates how Socratic seminars can foster a classroom environment whereby students are challenged to exhibit habits of mind but also feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts. The curriculum was built around the Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC) template and modules developed by a task force of CSU professors to prepare high school students for college-level course work. After reading non-fiction texts and completing various pre-reading and reading activities to prepare for the conversations, 18 senior English students engaged in four Socratic seminars. Using qualitative and quantitative research methods, I analyzed classroom observation notes, student evaluation rubrics, interview transcripts, student surveys, and student writing samples. The findings revealed that as the students engaged in dialogue, they enjoyed being in command of their learning and believed they gained in critical thinking from the Socratic method of teaching.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Introduction

As a high-school English teacher, I see students struggle daily to think beyond the literal level, yet the California English Language Arts Standards require students to think critically to exhibit higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), those skills at the top of Bloom's Taxonomy. Many teachers of college-prep students feel unsuccessful when trying to engage their students in under-the-surface thinking. Students seem resistant and ill-equipped to think beyond the obvious and, invariably, resort to a "hunt-and-peck" method to find the answer in the text. Frustration and anxiety rise when students realize that the answer must be gleaned from their reading and from their minds. In my experience, it seems as though only the GATE (Gifted and Talented Education), HONORS, and AP (Advanced Placement) students are truly challenged to think deeply on analytical levels. Ironically and unquestionably, college-prep students are poorly prepared for college when it comes to critical thinking. In a democratic society, it is imperative that *all* students are enfranchised educationally and that *all* students receive the same quality of education.

Background

After working with the Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC) materials in my classroom, and serving as a team leader for Reading Institute for Academic Preparation (RIAP) at CSU Monterey Bay, I became excited by the critical approach to topics that the ERWC modules employ, i.e. ones that require students to think critically about questions whose answers are not in the text. These materials rely on ethos, pathos, and logos questions, but no technique is

recommended as to how to move the students through these questions. Also, students have great difficulty expressing their thoughts because they are not usually required to express their opinions verbally in a classroom. Additionally, students confuse having "an opinion" with "having an *informed* opinion." I began to think how I might further the effectiveness of the ERWC materials. I began to ask, "How can I engage *all* students and further develop their critical thinking skills? How might they become better listeners in the process? How might students improve their ability to articulate their ideas, *and* with confidence?" With these questions in mind, my search for answers was born.

One day, a senior in my first period asked if we were going to have any Socratic seminars in class. "No," I replied, "but I've always wanted to learn how to facilitate them. Maybe one day after I have learned." Ironically, that afternoon, and then the next day, I had two conversations—one with a colleague and another with my university adviser. Both conversations focused on my desire to deepen students' critical-thinking skills, and both individuals suggested Socratic seminars. How strange that in a 24-hour period of time, three people had mentioned the same technique. Was it fate? With investigation, I learned that *Socratic seminar* has several aliases: *Socratic questioning, Socratic dialogue, Socratic method,* and *Socratic circles.* In my preliminary readings, I discovered that Socratic questioning is more than 2,400 years old, developed by Socrates who believed that within each of his students existed a reservoir of untapped knowledge and understanding. In questioning his students, he believed he could improve their reasoning skills towards more rational thinking supported with logic (Copeland, 2005). Scott Buchanan, of St. John's College, later coined the term *Socratic seminar* (Strong, 1996). Definitions for *Socratic seminar* abound, but the most precise description is, "Socratic seminars are conversations based on difficult texts in which the leader's primary role is to ask

questions" (Strong, 1996 p. 39). Mortimer Adler (1982) outlines Socratic seminar as "a mode of teaching called 'maieutic' because it helps the student bring ideas to birth" (p. 29). With this new information, I concluded that Socratic seminars would be the vehicle for solving many of the classroom issues I was encountering. I wanted to foster an environment of reflective thinking rather than having the students look to the book or to me for an answer.

My interest in Socratic seminars, though, extends beyond improving critical thinking. If Socratic seminars can improve critical thinking through conversation, can they not also build students' confidence levels? In observing my students, I have discovered that when they are asked a deeper-level question, one that eschews the "right" answer, they respond with dazed stares, silence, or "I don't know's." Students are unwilling to risk an answer, especially a wrong answer. If students, however, are confident in themselves, then they are confident in their learning. If students are confident in their learning, then they are academically successful. It seems that the two goals are interrelated. As Michael Strong (1997) asserts, "Seminar encourages the acknowledgement and cultivation of one's own voice...Students become empowered by their ability [to make their own critical judgments] and then develop a stake in the conversation because they are...defending...their identity itself" (pp. 50, 53). This Socratic spirit is worthy of further investigation, analysis, and practice.

Problem Statement and Purpose

Seeking equality for all students—instilling within them an ability to think critically with confidence—is an issue that motivates me to use Socratic seminars. At my high school, a disparity exists between the White and the Hispanic/Latino students. Clearly, social injustice exists when on the STARR/CST tests, the White students, who comprise the minority population (37%), continue to outscore the Hispanic/Latino students, who comprise the majority population

(54%). It appears that the Hispanic/Latino students are ill equipped to navigate the reading and writing required of these tests. Further, college-prep students are not being fairly served in comparison to the GATE/Honors/AP students because the heterogeneous grouping has caused too many teachers to "water-down" the curriculum. As a result, students are not being challenged to think critically beyond a few standard questions on a worksheet. Holding all students accountable for thinking critically is relegated to students answering one or two questions in a minimally-engaging lesson. I wish to ameliorate this inequality by using Socratic seminars to challenge all my students to think critically and to be confident learners. Herein lies the foundation of a pluralistic and democratic classroom, where all learners are equal in opportunity while also building respect and tolerance for others. As Michael Strong (1996) asserts, "A commitment to Socratic Seminars is consistent with methodological pluralism in classroom practice" (p. 39).

Equally important, I want to improve the effectiveness of my teaching. I wish to hone my role as a facilitator, allowing my students more control in their own learning. Truly, engaging all students is a challenge for any teacher, and engaging all students in critical thinking becomes an even greater challenge when teachers face large, heterogeneously-grouped classes. By assuming the role of a facilitator in Socratic seminars, I hope to empower my students so they see the relevance of education to their lives so that they grow as students and as individuals.

As a member of the English Department at my high school, I would like to propose and implement an action plan whereby all of the English teachers are trained in Socratic seminars within the next three years. Currently, we are working on a writing program and a scope and sequence of curriculum for grades 9 through 12. Within three years, this program should be well

established, and the teachers should be ready for another challenge to enriching their teaching by building their repertoire of skills and effective strategies through Socratic seminars.

With these problems and endeavors in mind, I propose the following two questions:

1) *How can Socratic seminars be used to strengthen students' critical thinking skills?* and

2) *How can Socratic seminars be used to enhance students' confidence with respect to their willingness to participate in class?*

This study examines the effect of using Socratic seminars in a 12th grade English class as a means of improving students' critical thinking skills, while also improving students' confidence to express their ideas.

In this chapter, I have provided an overall introduction to my topic and introduced my research questions. In Chapter 2, I will present a review of the literature that contextualizes my study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

If teachers accept the idea that all students can learn, then *all* students must have the same *quality* of education. This idea is the foundation of a democratic classroom. The challenge, then, is *how* to provide that same quality of education for all students. Teaching students to think is part of the answer because as humans, we cannot avoid thinking. Thinking is what humans do. As such, teachers strive to have their students acquire knowledge, develop skills, and gain in the understanding of ideas and concepts to prepare their students for real-world situations. Teachers, however, must also teach students to think more deeply, to question and to probe beyond the surface. Although there are many ways to teach critical thinking—for example through inventions, simulations, quotations or cartoons, journal writing, debates, and dramatizations—I have chosen Socratic seminars because students are placed in active, student-centered roles that require them to think abstractly and to communicate their ideas clearly with textual support, while also providing benefits in affective ways.

In this chapter, I will provide a review of literature relevant to my topic. First, I present an overview of critical thinking—its definition, elements—along with a general discussion of the philosophies of teaching critical thinking and of the methods used, including Socratic seminars. Next, the "nuts and bolts" of Socratic seminars, of how they work, follows. The third section presents the function and value of Socratic seminars in enhancing critical thinking, along with literature refuting this value. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of self-confidence as an affective benefit of Socratic seminars.

Teaching Critical Thinking to Students

Literature on critical thinking abounds with a myriad of definitions. Some definitions cite reasonable decision making, skillful problem solving, carefully thought-out judgments, as well as a value for information and ideas (Beyer, 1988 as cited in Campbell, 2004), self-corrective behavior, and sensitivity to context (Lipman, 1987). One definition (Paul, 1990, p. 33) expands to include two categories: thinking in the "weak sense" (self-serving thinking) or in the "strong sense" (fair-minded, broader thinking). While definitions abound, most of the literature cites the succinct definition of critical thinking as "reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (Ennis, 1985, p. 10).

Critical thinking may be characterized as possessing specific dispositions or skills, as well as traits or habits of mind. Confusion arises because these lists do not *seem* to match due to terminology and philosophy of thought. For example, Nickerson (1987) lists 23 *characteristics* of good thinking; Ennis (1987) lists fourteen critical thinking *dispositions* and twelve *abilities*, while Marzano (1988) lists twelve critical thinking *skills*, the same "skills" that Ennis labels in a separate list as "abilities." To complicate matters, Paul (1990, p. 34) lists ten *elements* of thought exhibited by the critical thinker. These lists are not entirely comparable, in some cases overlapping skills with affective behaviors; nevertheless, the lists of *characteristics, dispositions*, *skills*, and *elements* include the following ideas: analyzing the problem or question posed; asking and answering questions for clarification; analyzing evidence, data, or reasons given; judging the credibility of a source; identifying assumptions; and deciding on an action. Likewise, little agreement exists with defining the traits of mind. In brief, one habits of mind list emanates from the critical thinking dispositions (Meier, 2002) while another list focuses on affective

behaviors, such as humility, empathy, and integrity (Paul, 1990, p. 54), while a third lists 16 habits of mind that combine the two approaches (Costa & Kallick, 2000).

A plethora of literature advocates the importance of infusing critical thinking instruction into classroom curriculum. Some researchers believe that teaching critical thinking should be the primary task of education in that it provides a foundation for a democratic society because citizens have an obligation to think deeply about important issues and to foster progress (Adler, 1982; Campbell, 2004; Glaser, 1985; Goodlad, 1984 in Marzano, 1988; Lipman, 1987; Nickerson, 1987; Scriven, 1985; Strong, 1996). Adler (1982), in fact, proposes a one-track system of schooling to educate every child and to promote social equity. Furthermore, researchers argue that explicit instruction in critical thinking is needed because there is little evidence that students acquire skills in critical thinking, in the creative and higher cognitive processes, simply because they have studied a subject's course materials. Students think, but not all think equally (Campbell, 2004; Ennis, 1987; Nickerson, 1987). Others, though, warn that only teaching critical thinking is not enough. Students must have critical thinking dispositions and must be given opportunities to reflect, a key to critical thinking (Ennis, 1987; Paul, 1990). Dewey argued that reflective teaching requires more than isolated practice skills, and that these skills must be used in real problems that connect to the students' own experiences (cited in Campbell, 2004, p. 275; cited in Lipman, 1987, p. 157). To gain these skills---the habits of mind, the connectivity to action, and enhanced understanding—students must engage in dialoguing, reflection, and questioning (Adler, 1982; Ennis, 1987; Jones & Safrit, 1992; Lipman, 1987; Ormell, 1974; Paul, undated, cited in Marzano, 1988; Scriven, 1985; Strong, 1996). Some methods that accomplish this goal include presentations, debates, journal writings, cartoons, quotes, juries, scientific inquiries, think alouds, and Socratic seminars (Adler, 1982; Arnold,

Hart, & Campbell, 1988; Copeland, 2005; Ennis, 1987; Fishman, 1985; Gray, 1989; Jones & Safrit, 1992; Lambright, 1995; Lipman, 1987; Paul 1990, 1984; Polite & Adams, 1996; Strong, 1996; Tredway, 1995). In fact, Adler (1982) builds a foundational argument for the Socratic mode of teaching to substantiate his theory that students engaged in thinking for itself are active participants in a learning process that promotes understanding and a joy of learning.

Opposition, however, exists disputing the importance of teaching critical thinking. One researcher (Goldman, 1984) believes that children have the inner resources to learn many worthwhile things without being taught them directly, and educators should not be so arrogant as to think everything can and should be taught. He proposes that shaping a faculty of strong individuals who differ widely in their "ideas, values, and teaching styles" will show students that "critical thinking is not a performance with a classroom setting, but an essential component of full, successful living" (Goldman, 1984, p. 62). Teaching logic and critical thinking, he fears, will lead to a weakening in creativity. Likewise, criticisms exist for using Bloom's taxonomy as a guide for teaching critical thinking in that it omits imagination as an important component of understanding and provides too little guidance for the top three levels of the taxonomy. Specifically, Lipman (1987) and Ormell (1974) warn of the dangers of categorizing cognitive skills into hierarchical approaches because doing so creates blunt, overlapping, and inverted categories and reflects the attitude that education is "materialistic." That is, the hierarchical structure regards students as "material" handlers who acquire bits of knowledge of specifics and with this "material" demonstrate the various levels of the taxonomy (comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation). A student could achieve all the processes that correspond to the levels in Bloom' taxonomy without ever achieving any "genuine understanding," a taxonomy

that emphasizes a product-oriented society over "the appeal of education for education's sake" (Ormell, 1974, p. 6).

Implementation of Socratic Seminars

The technique of Socratic seminars dates back to Socrates, who used questioning to improve his students' reasoning skills thereby leading them to become more rational thinkers and to discover the underlying truth of the topic. Socratic questioning is based on the premise that all thinking has a structure—a logic—and the questioning exposes the logic of the participants' thoughts (Paul & Binker, 1990). Today, Socratic instruction can take many forms, but these forms all share one commonality—"that someone's thought is developed as a result of probing, stimulating questions asked" (Paul & Binker, 1990, p. 270). While one definition of Socratic seminar uses the term "formal discussion" (Roberts & Billings, 1999), some researchers and practitioners are careful to explain that Socratic seminars are not *discussions* because discussions are teacher driven and seek to resolve an issue usually with a right and wrong answer. Likewise, Socratic seminars are not *debates* because in debates, there is a concept of a competition to win an argument. Contrarily, Socratic seminars are student-driven *conversations* that are exploratory quests for deeper understandings about larger issues—the truths of the world, conversations with no definite beginning or end (Ball & Brewer, 2000; Copeland, 2005; Gray, 1989; Lambright, 1995).

Distinct components comprise the Socratic seminar. First, the teacher selects a text that is rich in ideas, issues, and values that the students read critically in preparation for the seminar. On the day of the seminar, students arrive with their annotated texts and sit in a circle, square, or rectangle, depending on the requirements of the classroom. If the class is large, a teacher might use an inner-and-outer circle arrangement whereby half of the students are

"talkers" seated in the inner circle and the other half are "listeners" seated in the outer circle. The responsibilities of the listeners can vary from peer evaluating, to taking notes, to recording issues or themes (Ball & Brewer, 2000; Copeland, 2005; Roberts & Billings, 1999). The students switch positions halfway through the seminar day or the seminar spans two days, with the students switching places on day two. The teacher poses an opening question that is broad, provocative, and unthreatening; the teacher also comes prepared with core questions (ones more focused on the text's issues) and with a closing question (one that connects to the life and experience of the students). These questions are used in the event the conversation stalls or loses focus or direction. Once the teacher poses the opening question, it is the students' responsibility to direct and develop the conversation. During this time, the teacher gives up control, remains neutral, and listens, facilitates, clarifies, takes notes, and manages any behavioral problems. When it is time for the seminar to conclude, the teacher poses a closing question. The seminar concludes with a student-driven assessment of the conversation. The techniques of assessing vary, but usually the students verbally evaluate their conversation in pairs or as a group. This step is crucial for encouraging self- reflection, for fostering active awareness of growth from the process, for improving higher-order thinking and learning, and for advancing the success of future seminars. The final step is the teacher's assessment and evaluation. While this step may be completed informally by providing the students with verbal feedback at the conclusion of the students' assessment, it may also be more formal with rubrics and/or written feedback on various assignments associated with the text and with the seminar's conversation (Ball & Brewer, 2000; Copeland, 2005; Gray, 1989; Lambright, 1995; Roberts & Billings, 1999; Strong, 1996; Tredway, 1995).

Socratic Seminars and Achievement Measures

The literature also provides evidence that Socratic seminars develop and refine students' critical thinking skills. Seminars provide an opportunity for students to make meaning and to think deeply about issues and ideas, different than the usual lessons of merely mastering information. Socratic seminars give students an opportunity to slow down their thinking and to elaborate on it, to test their ideas—ones just formed and ones learned in school. Socratic seminars require students to summarize, analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and compare and contrast—cognitive processes that develop more coherent and better-developed perspectives (Adler, 1982; Arnold, Hart, & Campbell, 1988; Ball & Brewer, 2000; Copeland, 2005; Gray, 1989; Lambright, 1995; Paul, 1990; Polite & Adams, 1996; Roberts & Billings, 1999; Strong, 1996; Tredway, 1995). Several researchers and practitioners even cite that seminars enhance students' abilities to use habits of mind, though they are not always spelled out (Lambright, 1995; Marzano, 1992; Roberts & Billings, 1999; Tredway, 1995). Some researchers are more visionary and revolutionary; they propose restructuring curriculum to improve education because of their firm beliefs in the value of Socratic seminars as a way to engage students (Adler, 1982; Polite & Adams, 1996; Strong, 1996). These proposals corroborate one study that warns that without authenticity, innovation is meaningless, and it names five standards for authentic instruction. All five standards are fulfilled by Socratic seminars—higher-order thinking skills, depth of knowledge, connectedness to the world beyond the classroom, substantive conversation, and social support for student achievement (Newman & Wehlage, 1993).

Researchers and practitioners also affirm that the key to achieving critically thoughtful conversations is the text. Texts—not textbooks—must be chosen carefully so as to engage the participant actively in the learning process by making the conversation relevant, intellectual, and

philosophical. Texts must contain abstract ideas, ideally on a current issue, with a philosophical dimension and an intellectual perspective (Adler, 1982; Ball & Brewer, 2000; Copeland, 2005; Gray, 1989; Polite & Adams, 1996; Roberts & Billings, 1999; Strong, 1996; Tredway, 1995). An added benefit of using such texts is that participants become better readers by learning to read more carefully and attentively and learning to annotate and take notes in preparation for the seminar (Adler, 1982; Copeland, 2005; Gray, 1989; Roberts & Billings, 1999; Strong, 1996).

Few studies dispute the benefit of critical thinking with Socratic seminars. In one study (Polite & Adams, 1996), the teachers were divided as to the usefulness of Socratic seminars, though they were generally supportive of it as a tool for building higher-order thinking skills. They questioned the "why" behind Seminars, perceiving "little difference between Seminar methodology and traditional learning" (p. 3). Additionally, the interviewed students revealed that the seminars enhanced their higher order thinking skills, yet some admitted to tuning out of sessions that were deeply abstract or irrelevant to them. The real issue underlying these responses was the text selections and the teachers' lack of proper training. Another researcher (Goldman, 1984) contends that teachers cannot be educated to use the Socratic method and that few "philosophy professors, even those who are lifelong scholars of Socrates, have successfully used the Socratic method in an meaningful or profound way" (p. 62). He proposes that curriculum be shifted from being *skill* centered to *idea* centered because skills (i.e., the skill of the Socratic method) do not generate thought, but ideas generate thinking. His view on the Socratic method is supported by Olson (1990), who sees the method as a technique characteristic of "inept instructors" who allow their students to give "unreflective (knee-jerk) responses to complex social issues" (cited in Rud, 1997, p. 9).

Socratic seminars and Affective Measures

Fewer studies focus on the potential affective benefits associated with Socratic seminars. One (Klein, 1975) tested the effectiveness of using Socratic dialogue vs. behavioral practice in the development of coping skills in 44 male 7th and 9th graders from a Toronto junior high school. The study found that the groups receiving the Socratic dialectic study increased their "confidence in their problem solving capacities and also showed a heightened sense of security and self-directness" (p. 255). While the study does not provide data to prove that the students' changes are of a permanent nature, it does demonstrate that Socratic dialogue develops, a least temporarily, students' coping skills and builds their confidence, corroborating Adler's (1982), Strong's (1996), Paul's (1990), and Gray's (1989) firm assertions that Socratic seminars engender confidence. In seminars, all participants are held accountable for their ideas and comments (they must provide text support), but they are held accountable to their peers, not to a teacher. Everyone is accepted as equal because no one has all the right answers. This shared knowledge empowers students because they are treated as people with valuable ideas worth listening to. If the text is a powerful one, enthusiasm arises from the issues. Students do not want to be left out. These experiences build self-confidence (Gray, 1989). Finally, Socratic seminars can reach at-risk students because the course materials and learning methods give them new confidence in the learning process not seen in the traditional lecture setting (Lambright, 1995). Ultimately, confidence is essential to building a democracy because with confidence, individuals resist manipulation by the media, specials interest groups, or by inner prejudices and irrationalities (Paul, 1990).

Even fewer studies discredit the use of Socratic seminars as vehicles for fostering self-confidence. Goldman (1984) sees a danger in engaging children in "internal examination,

analyz[ing] the idea [of the seminar] to reveal assumptions and hypotheses" because this process "may damage young people by robbing them of a sense of security. They may feel there is no truth...Cynicism and despair may follow" (p. 62). Thus, he believes Socratic seminars are valueless for instilling self-confidence. Likewise, some law students believe the "Socratic method," at least as used by the professors, is a tool for instilling fear and a lack of confidence by forcing students to participate in class where they learn to associate education with punishment (Burgess, 1990), and where others refer to the Socratic method as "ritualized combat" (Guinier, Fine, and Balin, 1997, cited in Rud, 1997, p. 9). In the cases of the law schools, Socratic seminars are not conducted in the manner that is detailed in books; rather, these are teacher-centered questioning sessions.

Summary

Socrates' idea of how to deepen his students' reasoning skills and rational thinking through questioning has had a profound impact on mankind for thousands of years. Researchers and practitioners alike have verified what Socrates believed, that "all thinking involves the asking of questions" (Copeland 2005, p. 7). Talking about ideas is not only powerful but also empowering. This review of literature has provided me with an understanding of why it is imperative that students learn through questioning and of its rightful, if not requisite, place in all English curricula.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This action research study focused on how Socratic seminars affect students' depth of critical thinking and how Socratic seminars affect students' confidence levels. In particular, this study focused on the use of the Socratic seminar to discuss non-fiction texts—such as essays, magazine articles, and books—in a high school senior English class. While there is a fair amount of research with Socratic seminars using literature, a dearth of research literature addresses using non-fiction texts. Consequently, I chose an action research approach to investigate these questions. According to Mills, "Action research...creates opportunities for all involved to improve the lives of children and to learn about the craft of teaching" (p. 8). As a teacher, I am committed to asking questions, reflecting on my practice, and improving my curriculum. Action research will allow me to do so.

Setting

This study was conducted at a high school located in an agriculturally-oriented city in central California. It is one of four high schools in the school district. The student population consists of approximately 2700 students, of which 57% are Hispanic/Latino, 32% white, and 11% "other". The school runs on an August-to-June calendar and serves grades 9 through 12. Of the four high schools in the district, it is the most comprehensive, offering over 20 GATE (Gifted and Talented Education), Honors, and AP (Advanced Placement) courses; ROP (Regional Occupational Program) classes; choir, band, and orchestra programs; and a broad athletics program. Parent involvement with Migrant Education, School-Site Council, and boosters clubs is strong. This involvement can be attributed to two factors: (1) The administration has made a concerted effort to include migrant parents in the community of the school by hiring a full-time

Migrant/Bilingual Education Coordinator who, among his duties, actively seeks these parents' involvement in the school's programs; and (2) because the school draws from the upper-middle class areas of the adjacent canyons; many of these parents are college educated and see a value in supporting programs for the benefit of not only their students but all students.

Participants

The participants in the study consisted of students and myself. Student participants all came from one high school senior English class of approximately 18 randomly assigned, heterogeneously grouped students. The class consisted of 9 males and 9 females, of which 3 were White, 12 Latinos/Latinas, and 3 representing Filipino, Iranian, and Black minority groups. Of these students, 4 may be classified as high achievers, 7 as medium achievers, and 7 as low achievers. All of the students participated in the Socratic seminars, completed the open-ended questionnaire, and completed the writing sample; however, only 8 students were interviewed, based on a representative mix of gender, ethnicity, and class letter grade.

With twenty years experience teaching English at the high school level, I participated as the action researcher by implementing the Socratic seminars and then observing, interviewing, and collecting data. My experience as a teacher began in 1975 as a substitute teacher fresh out of college. This one-year experience built my confidence, taught me the importance of good classroom control, and introduced me to effective and ineffective teaching methods, not to mention some dynamic lessons and innovative strategies and materials. Following this experience, I worked as a full-time classroom teacher under temporary contracts because of the overabundance of teachers in the job market. Wondering if my skills would be better used in the business world, I decided to venture out of the educational field by becoming a personnel assistant at a local food processing plant. My employment was voluntarily terminated when I

decided to become a stay-at-home mother. I re-entered the educational field in 1993 and taught for seven years at the same high school where I initially started my teaching career. In 2000, I transferred to another high school in the school district located close to my home, also my alma mater. My first exposure to Socratic seminars was at a CATE (California Association of the Teachers of English) convention in 1997. I found this presentation intriguing and wondered if it would be possible to incorporate such a method into my classroom. Feeling that I had other strategies to master, I filed away this information, until a colleague who uses Socratic seminars encouraged me to do use this method. After deciding on this focus for my action research project, I observed my colleague's Socratic seminars and read extensively on the subject.

Procedures

The students were taught a curriculum based on the Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC) developed by a California State University (CSU) taskforce, designed to prepare high school seniors for the rigors of college-level English. The ERWC is composed of 12 modules that use short non-fiction texts—gathered from reputable newspapers, magazines, and books—on current topics of interest to junior and senior high school students. Only one curriculum module from the ERWC course materials was selected and taught, with the remainder of modules being designed by me from the ERWC template. The curriculum modules and template contain a "discussion phase" employing ethos, logos, and pathos questions, which I augmented by using Socratic seminars.

Assigned Readings

The readings were selected based on high-interest topics, somewhat controversial in nature, which would be intriguing to high school seniors. Each of the four Socratic seminars was based on a separate topic of interest, with Socratic seminars #1, #2, and #4 requiring two readings as

preparation for the seminar and with Socratic seminar #3 requiring three readings as preparation. The topics and readings for each of the seminars were as follows:

- **Seminar #1: Sexting.** The assigned readings included, "Cell-Phone Second Thoughts" by Nancy Gibbs (*Time,* March 16, 2009) and "Teens, Nude Photos and the Law" by Dahlia Lithwick (*Newsweek,* February 23, 2009).
- **Seminar #2: Tattoos.** The assigned readings included, "Tattoos are today's way to establish identity: Suffer a Little Pain, Join a Special Club" by Vicki Leon (*Los Angeles Times,* January 31, 2008) and "Tattoo Bans" by Carolyn Sayre (*Time,* November 5, 2007).
- **Seminar #3: Violence in School Sports.** The assigned readings included, "The Weak Shall Inherit the Gym" by Rick Reilly (*Sports Illustrated,* May 8, 2001), "Rage Explodes in Youth Sports" (*News-Press,* May 13, 2000), and "Our Children Our Future—Athletics: A Winning Solution" by Susan Miller Degnan and Ken Rodriguez (*Miami Herald,* January 12, 1997).
- **Seminar #4: Language, Gender, and Culture.** This seminar was based on the ERWC module entitled *Language, Gender, and Culture.* The assigned readings included an excerpt from *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation,* "His Politeness is Her Powerlessness," by Deborah Tannen (1990) and an excerpt from *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Childhood Among Ghosts,* by Maxine Hong Kingston (1976).

The Reading Process

The students initially read the required readings, following the reading process, and with teacher guidance prepared for the Socratic seminars by completing various activities, including a

graphic organizer for each reading. A complete description of the activities and the outcomes students were expected to achieve through them is provided in Appendix 1; a brief summary is provided here.

First, students employed pre-reading strategies such as surveying the text, making predictions, asking questions, reading the first paragraph to determine the article's topic and the author's opinion on it, turning the title into a question to be answered at the end of the reading, and completing pre-reading vocabulary activities. They then read the text, annotating their thoughts about the author's thesis, important ideas, and questions they might have, after which I led them in a "debriefing" session where I annotated the article along with them to illustrate how they could learn to check and validate their own annotations, which they were solely responsible for with the last two readings. The students then re-read the text for the essay's structure, the author's main arguments/ideas and use of rhetorical devices, completing vocabulary activities and a "Sequential Flow Chart" (see Appendix 2) as necessary, after which I led them in discussion of those elements. Finally, students completed a "Graphic Organizer for Socratic Seminar" (see Appendix 3) that we discussed in class, after which they wrote short reflective responses to thought-provoking quotes or statements from the texts to stimulate their thoughts on the text and topic.

Preparation for the First Socratic Seminar

Because the students were not familiar with the Socratic seminar method, it was necessary to prepare the students with foundational information. On the first preparatory day, I delivered a PowerPoint presentation on the history of the Socratic seminar method, including what the components are and how the seminar works. This presentation was followed by a brief discussion of the main points and provided an opportunity for students to ask questions. In the

next class session, I showed the video *How To Conduct Successful Socratic Seminars* (ASCD, 1998) that addressed the climate and expectations, the room arrangement, the opening question, the grounding of the seminar discussion in a text, the teacher as a facilitator, and the role of the students. Following the video, I conducted a brief debriefing of the main points addressed and asked for questions to clarify any misunderstandings the students gleaned from the video, emphasizing to the students what their responsibilities were for the seminar.

In addition, I prepared a transparency of the essential agreements for the Socratic seminar and displayed them on the overhead projector for the class to discuss and modify, as desired. The final list included: Be attentive, be respectful, be a thinker, and engage in no side conversations. Finally, I distributed a green card with a list of six "response stems" reflecting various levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (see Appendix 4) that students could refer to, to frame their responses to each other. The class was now prepared for the Socratic seminar to be held the next day.

The Socratic Seminar

Each seminar was conducted during one class period, allowing 35 minutes for the seminar and 10 minutes for group evaluation at the end. For each of the four seminars, I instructed the students form one circle. Some Socratic seminar leaders employ a two-circle format whereby half of the students, seated in the inside circle, carry on the discussion while the other half of the students in the outside circle score those speaking on the inside circle, with the students switching circles midway through the discussion. My class, however, was small enough, with only 18 students, that a two-circle format would have made for an extra small grouping and had the potential to intimidate the more shy and quiet students.

The students were required to bring to the seminar the annotated texts, the "Graphic Organizer for Socratic Seminar," and the green "response stems" card as "tickets" for

participation; those not having these materials would not be allowed to participate that day. For most seminars, students also were given up to four blank colored cards—two green, one yellow, and one red—to correlate with their discussion contributions. After they formed a circle with their desks and I checked for "their tickets", they placed their cards on their desks, and after answering any final questions, the seminar began.

As discussion facilitator, it was my job to prepare and ask an opening question, several core questions, and one closing question, which I had prepared several days ahead of the planned seminar, but I did not intend to speak at any other time during the seminar. The students were to be in control of the discussion, and even if the discussion proved especially stimulating to me, or even if the discussion fell to silence, I did not intervene. Therefore, following my opening question, the students took over the discussion by offering and discussing answers to my question and then posing their own. At critical points, I interjected my few core questions, but it was up to the students to respond to them. The first two times a student spoke, s/he placed down the green cards; the third time the yellow card; and the fourth time the red card. When all the cards were laid down, that student was not allowed to speak again. These cards limited the amount of times (four) that each student spoke, thereby discouraging the "talkative ones" and encouraging the "silent ones." This strategy was used only twice and eventually was eliminated as the students became more comfortable with the seminar format. After posing the closing question, I allowed the discussion to continue for ten more minutes.

During the discussion, I tallied how many times each student spoke while also taking notes as to the quality of the student's comments, the use of any text references, and whether or not the student reflected any of the habits of the mind generally associated with this type of critical thinking, such as giving evidence, stating connections, and/or stating the other side.

These habits of mind are included in the "Socratic Seminar Grading Rubric" (see Appendix 5) detailed in the Data Collection section of this chapter.

My final role included posing several questions at the conclusion of each seminar, such as "What did you like? What could be improved? What was your overall impression of how successful the seminar was? What are your observations?" These questions initiated an oral student evaluation of the seminar (students' End-of-Seminar Oral Evaluation), and all students (whether they spoke during the discussion phase of the seminar or not) were required to respond to the closing question by sharing one or two reflections on the seminar, speaking one by one around the circle. As the teacher, I assessed student performance based on each student's participation in the seminar and completed a "Socratic Seminar Grading Rubric" for each student. This instrument is described in the next section.

Data Collection

For the purpose of this research, data were collected using a variety of means to address both research questions: How can Socratic seminars be used to strengthen students' critical thinking skills? and, How can Socratic seminars be used to strengthen students' self-confidence? The methods I used included a grading rubric, a student group interview, a student written survey/questionnaire, a student-writing sample, and a reflective teaching journal. These data collection means helped to provide a depth of understanding relative to the impact of incorporating Socratic seminars into the curriculum, as well to provide for a triangulation of the data collected.

Seminar Grading Rubric. This instrument is a "Socratic Seminar Grading Rubric" (see Appendix 5) that I used to note the following criteria for each speaker/participant in the Socratic discussion: the number of comments; the quality of comments; the number of text references;

and the clear demonstration of "habits of mind" (six, as noted on the rubric). The rubric offers five gradations of quality with regard to each criterion, with each gradation corresponding to an A-F rating and each of the four criteria worth up to 25 points, for a total of 100 points. I gleaned the information for completing the rubric from my observations using a tally and note sheet previously referred to in the Socratic Seminar section of this chapter (see entire rubric in Appendix 5).

Student Group Interview. A group interview was conducted in the classroom the day after the last seminar with one group of eight students, representative of both genders, of various ethnicities, and of low, middle, and high achievers. First, all members of the group were instructed to respond in writing, for seven minutes, to the six interview questions developed for the oral group interview to determine their affective responses to their experiences of participating in Socratic seminars (see Appendix 6). This step helped students to organize their thoughts before the group interview began. The interview itself was approximately 30 minutes in length. The interview questions were open-ended and designed specifically to help answer the research questions. As such, they focused on the students' background and experiences with class discussions in the past, how the Socratic seminars had helped/not helped with their confidence to share their thoughts in group discussions, how their ability to contribute to a group discussion had changed in any way as a result of this teaching method, and how this type of teaching and learning had affected their "comfort zones." Students also were given the opportunity to express any other thoughts or concerns they had about the seminars. The interview was audio recorded and the transcript transcribed.

Student Written Survey Questions. The ten students not selected for the student group interviews responded, in handwriting, to a "Student Written Survey Questions" sheet (see

Appendix 7), in the classroom, while the eight other students completed their group interview. As with the student interview questions, these questions were open-ended and designed to help answer the research questions of how the Socratic seminars had helped/failed to help the students think critically and whether the seminars helped/failed to foster their confidence in sharing their ideas in group discussions. Unlike the student group interview questions whereby all of the six questions focused on the two research questions, only two questions in this survey focused on the two research questions with an additional four questions focused on what the students liked/disliked about the seminar method and solicited any recommendations as to teachers' adopting this discussion method.

Student Writing Sample. During one class period after the conclusion of the last Socratic seminar, students were given a topic and writing prompt in the California State University (CSU) format used for the English Placement Test (EPT). The purpose of the writing sample was to assess how well the students could use critical thinking in their written response to the prompt. The topic for this class session was Language, Gender, and Culture—taken from the Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC) module *Language, Gender, and Culture*—and the writing prompt was, "Drawing on both Tannen and Kingston, is it possible to say that there's a 'right way' to speak? What does speaking 'correctly' depend on? How do you know this?" Students were given 45 minutes to prepare a writing sample in which they responded to the prompt.

The "Evaluation Form," based on the CSU English Placement Test (EPT) (see Appendix 8) and included as part of the module's lesson, was used to assess the level of the students' critical thinking as reflected in the writing sample. This rubric contains six gradations of quality for six criteria focused on: response to the topic; understanding and use of the assigned readings; quality and clarity of thought; organization, development, and support; syntax and command of the

language; and grammar, usage, and mechanics. Student responses were assessed by averaging the various gradations for the six criteria into a final letter grade of A to F; the "superior" and "strong" levels equated to an A/B, the "adequate" level a C, the "marginal" level a C-/D+, and the "weak" and "very weak" levels a D/D-. Each student's grade for each of these gradations was converted into points on a 12-point scale (A=12; A-=11; B+=10, gradating down to a D-=1 and an F=0) and averaged for a final grade. For the sake of answering the two research questions in my study, I considered only the three criteria of "understanding and use of the assigned readings", "quality and clarity of thought", and "development and support".

Reflective Teaching Journal. After each Socratic seminar, I wrote in my reflective teaching journal to document my observations and thoughts of the students' behaviors, especially those that reflected critical thinking, associated habits of mind, and self-confidence. For example, the critical thinking behaviors might include evidence of students: voicing ideas that reflect the upper pyramid of Bloom's Taxonomy (analysis, synthesis, evaluation); understanding the rhetorical devices an author uses; and recognizing the ethos, logos, and pathos aspects of the article. Examples of demonstrating the habits of mind associated with critical thinking could include students questioning evidence and viewpoint, searching for connections and patterns, supposing a different situation, and pondering why any of these ideas matter. The self-confidence behaviors might be indicated by the number of times a student spoke and by the number of times a quieter student would speak up.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an ongoing part of data collection. As I collected my data and began to understand better the issues of Socratic seminars, I constantly and consistently revised and updated my analysis to further refine my study.

Seminar Grading Rubric. Data from this instrument were tallied quantitatively. Tallies were first computed for two categories of the rubric—"Number of Comments" and "Habits of Mind"—and then a graphic organizer was developed, replicating the rated criteria; then tallies from the rubrics were entered for the rated areas after each Socratic seminar. This chart facilitated a comparison of results from seminar to seminar.

Student Group Interview. The interview was transcribed and then analyzed to identify any major patterns in students' comments. Each pattern identified was used to label a separate sheet of paper; subsequently, all interview data pertaining to each pattern was transferred onto the appropriate page. Finally, all individual patterns/pages were analyzed and interrelated patterns were condensed into more general patterns, which could be combined with data from other sources to answer the research questions.

Student Written Survey Questions. The students' responses to the survey were analyzed similarly to how the interview data were analyzed except that student responses were first categorized by survey question. Each question was transferred to a separate sheet of paper, whereby all survey data for each question was transferred to the appropriate sheet. Next the responses were coded and patterns identified. As with the student group interview questions, all individual pages were analyzed and interrelated patterns were condensed into more general patterns. This data could then be triangulated with data from the other sources to answer the research questions.

Student Writing Sample. Data from this instrument was tallied quantitatively, using the Evaluation Form based on the CSU English Placement Test described earlier, for three of the six criteria and gradations on the rubric. Specifically, "Understanding and use of the assigned reading," "Quality and clarity of thought," and "...development, and support" were analyzed as

they are representative of habits of mind. The remaining three criteria, "Response to the topic," "Syntax and command of the language" and "Grammar, usage, and mechanics" relate to writing skills rather than to habits of mind. A graphic organizer was designed to replicate the Evaluation Form, displaying the three criteria under consideration along with the six gradations. The number of students scoring in each category was tallied, along with their names (see Appendix 9). The resulting quantitative data was triangulated with all qualitative data to help identify the themes that would best frame responses to the research questions.

Reflective Teaching Journal. My observations were analyzed in the same way as were student survey and interview data, to identify any significant patterns including improvements or regressions in the students' comments and responses for each of the seminars. Patterns identified from my journal were triangulated with those yielded by the other data collection instruments.

Overall. Ultimately, all patterns derived from all data sources were analyzed collectively. That is, all patterns identified from analysis of each individual data source were compared, and overlapping or interrelated patterns were combined with each other to yield a few broad, overall themes. These themes formed the basis of the answers to my research questions and will be described in the following chapter.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented a description of the school where my study was conducted, the participants in the study—including my students and myself—and the methods I used to design, implement, and evaluate my action research project. In the next chapter, the data obtained from the rubrics, self-evaluation forms, survey questions, interviews, and my reflective teaching journal will be presented and analyzed. The themes derived from this analysis will then be formulated into responses to my research questions.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter outlines the results of my study on using Socratic seminars in my classroom, and was based on the following two research questions: 1) *How can Socratic seminars be used to strengthen students' critical thinking skills?* 2) *How can Socratic seminars be used to enhance students' confidence with respect to their willingness to participate in class?*

As I engaged in discovering the answers to these research questions, I collected data through a combination of qualitative and quantitative means. In his chapter, I discuss the results of my data analysis, which were consolidated into six overall themes—three stemming from the first research question and three stemming from the second. Prior to this, however, I discuss the results of my efforts to implement Socratic seminars in my classroom, as it was those experiences that formed the core of my findings.

Implementation of Socratic seminars

In November, 2009, I embarked on a new challenge with eighteen senior high school English students who had never participated in a Socratic seminar. As I explained my project and their role in it, some seemed eager to try something new while others donned a face of panic—they would *have to* speak. Knowing they knew nothing of Socratic seminars, and little of Socrates, I provided a foundational lesson (previously described) that outlined just what was comprised in the process. I emphasized that my role was minimal—save to pose an opening question, a couple of core questions, and a closing question—and that they would control the discussion, not I.

In anticipation of potential problems, I planned several strategies. First, students must come prepared with the graphic organizers, serving as "tickets," that we would complete in the preparatory phase of the seminars. Second, I decided to borrow an idea from a colleague who is well versed in Socratic seminars whereby colored cards would be used to encourage quiet students to talk and talkative students to listen, thus attempting to provide equity during the discussion period. Third, I gave the students a "cheat sheet" of response stems that reflected the multiple levels of Bloom's Taxonomy to help them phrase their comments. Fourth, for the first two seminars I reviewed the seminar rules as to proper behavior. Finally, I prepared myself mentally to remain silent during the conversation and to provide no facial feedback to the students, and I came prepared with enough questions to "save" the discussion, if need be.

Once I began the seminars, one problem I encountered had to do with some of the students not understanding the difference between a seminar and a debate. This problem surfaced after the second seminar when during the End-of-Seminar Oral Evaluation, one student suggested that we "tweak our seminars to focus on debating." Another student complained that the conversation was too civilized, too polite. This comment indicated to me that the student did not understand the difference between a seminar, a recitation, and a debate. In response, I prepared a lesson for the next day that explained the difference between a seminar and a debate, and a seminar and a recitation. In reflecting on this situation, I realized that this student's opinions, in part, were the result of one of my colleagues on campus who conducts his American history classes and government classes completely using debate. He encourages the students to rile and anger each other, to try "to get the students going." As a result, some students have concluded that the only meaningful, interesting verbal exchange is confrontational. Additionally, after these two students voiced their ideas, others agreed, saying, "Since we were all pretty much in agreement, there

wasn't much to say." Their implication was that unless there was disagreement, no conversation, meaningful or not, could take place. Clearly the students had not learned that pithy conversation involves being open to new ideas and thinking about them, not "debating" and defending their own ideas. I had to retrain these students' thinking, explaining to them that debates and seminars were two different methods of exchanging ideas and to mix them was to ignore the foundation of their purposes. It is not that one is better than the other so much as they are different methods.

Much of my frustration, however, stemmed from the few students who refused to speak. I tried two additional techniques in addition to ones I employed at the beginning of this study: talking with the students personally, asking them what might allow them to speak and praising their good ideas that we all wanted to hear; and increasing the amount of participation points for the last two seminars. None of these methods worked, and the students remained silent. It did not seem to matter to them that losing 100 points per seminar lowered their grades significantly. On the positive side, these students worked more diligently on the other assignments to try to minimize the damage to their grades. Such behavior does indicate that fears are so powerful that a teacher must think carefully of positive ways to motivate these students. I do believe that with a few more seminars, they would have begun to speak because, as described in Chapter 5, during the end-of-the-seminar evaluation some students stated that they genuinely wanted to hear the silent students' opinions and the silent students themselves stated they wanted to say something, and almost did, but then "chickened out." Time is most likely the best weapon against fear.

Data Analysis

In this section, I apply my findings to my research questions to discuss what my findings suggest about student learning—both academic and affective—in the conversations of Socratic seminars. With regards to my first question concerning how Socratic seminars can strengthen

students' critical thinking, three particular themes emerged from my data: *1) Preparation nurtures critical thinking; 2) Socratic seminars facilitate multiple understandings; 3) Socratic seminars develop habits of the mind.* With regards to how Socratic seminars can enhance students' confidence, the study evinces three themes: *1) Socratic seminars empower students to learn; 2) Socratic seminars are emotionally safe; 3) Socratic seminars create a sense of community.*

As discussed in Chapter 3, my data source yielded both qualitative and quantitative data. As these kinds of data are analyzed and managed differently, for each research question the qualitative data findings will be discussed first, followed by quantitative data findings.

Socratic Seminars to Strengthen Students' Critical Thinking

Qualitative Findings

Data analysis yielded three major themes with respect to how Socratic seminars can be used to strengthen students' critical thinking: *1) Preparation nurtures critical thinking; 2) Socratic seminars facilitate multiple understandings; 3) Socratic seminars develop habits of the mind.*

Preparation nurtures critical thinking.

In Socratic seminars, students learn the value of preparing for a meaningful conversation. Preparation for a Socratic seminar is key to nurturing critical thinking. The text used in a seminar must be rich in ideas and one that presents an issue and examines values that encourage open and thoughtful conversation. These kinds of texts require that the students understand the purposes, opinions, and arguments of what the authors are stating or implying and spend the time and effort to train their minds to look for the underpinnings that reading, thinking, and discussing require. In preparing my students for the seminars, I required them to complete various

activities—annotations and graphic organizers— aimed at uncovering the underpinnings of the texts. The students were required to use these items in the seminars.

All of my data indicated that indeed, the students saw value in these preparatory activities. For example, when I asked the interviewed students if the Socratic method helped them think more critically about the articles they read, one student shared, "This [Socratic] method helped me think more critically...because we had a chance to annotate and brainstorm the article piece by piece." Another student stated, "This method of teaching helped my critical thinking about the articles that I read because I had to prepare myself to speak about the topic...I had to analyze the text more than I usually do. That way, when I came to talking about it, I was able to say things I felt or what I thought about...I had to come prepared." The students in the Student Written Survey responses corroborated these thoughts to some extent. Although most of those respondents did not elaborate upon this question, at least two did. One wrote, "I think it [the Socratic teaching method] helps students with learning how to read and break down articles and other writing...[and] helps them critically think." The other student echoed these comments by confirming that, "Socratic seminars...help the student be prepared...and increase understanding of any text..."

During the oral interview and in the written survey, the students not only confirmed the value of preparation for seminars but also offered their appraisal of how the Socratic seminars themselves affected their ability to think critically. Students felt the seminars helped them to think spontaneously, to expand their thinking, and to make connections. One student shared that he felt the seminars, "...helped me to think on the spot...to give out your opinion. It takes more than just raising your hand. You're actually giving examples of your life, and you're expanding your mind and thinking [about] more than just one question. It helped me expand my thinking of

what the articles meant." Another student wrote, "The most dramatic improvement [in critical thinking] is my ability to build off of others' ideas…I listened intently and developed ideas based on theirs. Also, I've learned to back up what I'm saying with examples from the text which I would have never done before." Finally, another student's comments confirm the value of conversation in students' learning in his statement that, "You actually had to think past it [the question] to keep the conversation going. Instead of just pulling the fact out of your head, you had to think deeper to keep it [the conversation] going." As I noted in my reflections, in these Socratic seminars, the students could not rely on the teacher to enable them by directing their thinking or by filling their silence. It was not "teaching by telling." It was "maieutic" teaching, as Adler states (1982), wherein when a teacher asks questions, students give birth to ideas.

Although students clearly believed that they gained in critical thinking from their Socratic seminar conversations, evidence from their writing samples did not support that belief. Three specific sections of the writing rubric were considered for analysis of the students' critical thinking: "Understanding and Use of the Assigned Reading," "Quality and Clarity of Thought," and "Development and Support." Of the six quality descriptors—superior, strong, adequate, marginal, weak, and very weak—13 of the 15 students who wrote responses scored in the adequate, marginal, and weak categories. Only one student scored in the strong category, while one scored in the weak category. Further, some of the consistently best thinkers during the seminars scored in the adequate, marginal, and weak categories in the writing. My journal reflections on this discrepancy between students' beliefs and their writing achievement noted some possible reasons including the vastly different requirements of speaking and writing, especially in timed "on demand" test situations; these will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Socratic seminars facilitate multiple understandings.

Conversation is a powerful tool for gaining understanding of any concept or idea, and especially of controversial or difficult issues under discussion. For some of my students, the Socratic seminars provided an opportunity for clarification of the text, for resolving a misreading and misunderstanding of the content of the articles and of the topic under discussion. One young lady shared that, "During seminars they [students] would talk about it [the article], and I would think, 'Oh, so that's what it is,' so it helped me understand more things that I didn't know already." This student, being able to listen to others' ideas, benefited from the speakers' understandings of the article. This student came to the seminar knowing she was lacking in understanding all aspects of the article and willingly accepted her gap in understanding; indeed, she had failed to ask what that passage meant. In seminar, its meaning was offered to her by her peers, as a gift.

During the seminars, two additional observations surfaced. First, unlike the young lady who came in with misunderstandings, others came in with unknown gaps in their understanding. That is, the students were not aware that they had missed a point. One of the male participants provided an interesting revelation, "The fact that students were talking about the article drew my attention to parts I hadn't thought about or [that I] skipped over." As noted in my reflections, it seems plausible to conclude that in a Socratic seminar, a student's understanding of a text grows from the conversation of the students and that students learn from other students through the exchange of ideas. It is also plausible to conclude that a Socratic seminar can be viewed by students as a great equalizer—everyone's ideas are valuable in promoting students' understanding.

A second observation from my Reflective Teaching Journal also substantiates the value of sharing ideas. In the End-of-Seminar Oral Evaluations, in the Student Group Interview responses, and in the Student Written Survey responses, students commented on the fact that when the participants shared examples from their own lives or stated their own opinions, the listeners' understanding of the topic became clearer. In listening to their peers' views, students gained new perspectives on the topic. As one student said, "Hearing people's different opinions...made me think more...and putting myself in their positions, and looking [at] it from a different point of view...helped me understand better what I was reading about." The students' understanding of a topic directly related to the idea that when people talk, connections occur, and understanding is enhanced. It seems, therefore, that when students participate in Socratic seminars, those conversations promote a deeper understanding not only of the text and the topic under discussion, but also of one's own personal views on the topic.

Socratic seminars develop habits of mind.

Evidence from my seminar observations and from the students' reflective comments supports the conclusion that Socratic seminars provide a forum for students to practice and develop the habits of mind. As Elder and Paul (1998) suggest, "The goal of critical thinking is to establish a disciplined 'executive' level of thinking, a powerful inner voice of reason, to monitor, assess, and reconstitute—in a more rational direction—our thinking, feeling, and action" (p. 300). These processes were observed during the four Socratic seminars and, as described in Chapter 3, six (6) habits of mind were tracked for this project: 1) repeats the question in the answer; 2) gives evidence; 3) states connections to other topics; 4) states the significance of what you (the speaker) are saying; 5) extends the conversation with "what if" statements; and 6) states the other side.

In the first Socratic seminar, the students' habits of mind were limited, at best. The first seminar's topic was on sexting, a timely topic for teenagers. Despite this relevant topic, the seminar was characterized by periods of silence that alternated with periods of guarded discussion. My impression from the conversation was that some were not thinking, were not truly listening, while others were speaking; they seemed to be thinking of a comment they could interject so they could receive credit for participating. When the students finally spoke, they voiced comments that did not necessarily dovetail with the previous ones. They had nothing to add or no new angle to pursue with the previous ideas that had been voiced. What resulted was awkward silence, blank stares, heads bent looking at desks, and heavy sighing. For example, one student commented how one must look at others and not make the same mistakes, thinking of family honor and pride to prevent one from acting irresponsibly. No one, however, pursued this astute comment. Silence abounded. Another student made an insightful statement about how teenagers are like clay; they can be molded during the teen years, but this comment languished in silence. Interestingly enough, during the evaluation phase of the seminar, one student commented that he only spoke once because "I was waiting to speak until you [the teacher] threw out deeper questions." As noted in my reflections, this statement implied passivity on the part of the student who viewed his role as the same as in a recitation, that in his mind, the ideas needed to be generated by me rather than by his classmates. His statement clearly indicated that his habits of the mind were not developed.

Of the eleven (11) students who spoke during the first seminar, only three were able to extend meaning by stating connections to other topics, with the remainder repeating the question or repeating the person's name with whom they were agreeing. Of special note is the fact that no students disagreed with any comments voiced or used evidence from the text. Stating the

significance of what they were saying, extending the conversation with "what if" situations, and stating the other side were not observed.

The majority of the students showed growth by the end of the last seminar, seminar #4. The topic for this seminar was Language, Gender, and Culture—how these three elements affect women in society. Though there was not a significant growth in the numbers of students who spoke, those who spoke during the first seminar, the ones who initially shone in their thinking, contributed more often and with deeper insight by this seminar. Of the other students, not all spoke frequently, but when they did, their comments were richer and deeper, reflecting the habits of mind. Specifically, students voiced more connections to the text—no connections to the text were voiced in seminar #1; made a multitude of connections to their personal experiences, to their heritage, and to their observations; tied the conversation to the two authors whose articles we had read and studied—text connections; and insightfully extended the conversation by connecting their ideas to the media, to politics, and to society. In addition, students politely disagreed with others, citing reasons for their disagreement. These contrary comments did not surface until seminar #3, and more of these comments surfaced in seminar #4.

The students began the conversation in this seminar by responding to my opening question, "Considering both Tannen's and Hong Kingston's texts, what sorts of cultural expectations do American women face about how to speak and behave?" The conversation, though slow-starting at first, developed into one where the students discussed how women are taught to be nice, and how men's speech is judged with regards to how gay men speak as opposed to straight men. One female student admitted that she would never date a feminine-talking man. Others talked about gender issues they had observed on television programs, such as Iron Chef and The Millionaire Matchmaker. Whereas in the first seminar provocative comments languished in silence, they now

became fodder for more comments. The conversation culminated with comments about cursing, about Hillary Clinton, about how women want recognition for ability, and about how a woman's role in society is a "programmed one" depending on one's culture, e.g. Mexican culture.

Of significance is the fact that all of these comments followed a progression of thinking that was divergent and connected to the active conversation. The comments made sense, were not random in nature, and exhibited that the students were not only listening to each other, but also were thinking in the process. The students, though not all, repeated the question in the answer, gave evidence, stated connections to the topic, stated the significance of what they were saying, and stated the other side. However, in none of the seminars did any of the students truly exhibit extending the conversation with "what if." Admittedly, the progress the students showed in this last seminar was emergent in nature, but this seminar was the first one where some of the habits of the mind surfaced for the first time.

Summary

From my collective qualitative data, it seems plausible to conclude that seminars do provide an opportunity for students to develop critical thinking skills because they engage in conversation. Seminars broadened my students' understanding of a text, of the issue under discussion, and of its relevancy to their lives and to society. All the students felt they gained in their critical thinking skills despite their participating in only four seminars. Even the few students who never spoke stated they gained as critical thinkers. It also must be noted, however, that many of the students' comments acknowledging that they had gained in critical thinking attributed, in part, these gains to the preparation they engaged in prior to the seminars. Clearly, merely talking about a text does not ensure one will gain in critical thinking.

Quantitative Findings

Quantitative data were analyzed by computing tallies for each category of each data-collection instrument, and then using the data to create charts to illustrate trends or patterns. Those findings are illustrated below.

Seminar Grading Rubric

Table 1, below, compares data from the latter three seminars. Note that data for habits of mind were not collected during the first seminar, as the focus of that initial seminar was on encouraging students to speak and to become familiar with the Socratic method.

TABLE 1

Student	Seminar #2	Seminar #3	Seminar #4
A	1	2	1
B	4	4	4
C	4	4	4
D	0	2	2
E	0	2	3
F	0	2	3
G	4	4	4
H	0	1	3
I	4	4	4
J	2	4	1
K	2	0	0
TOTALS	**21**	**29**	**29**
AVERAGES	**1.9**	**2.6**	**2.6**

As can be seen from the table, although a few students greatly increased in participation from the first to the last seminars (e.g., Student D), others did not and, in fact, one student (K) participated even less during the last two seminars. Overall, neither the total nor average number of student participation efforts changed over the course of the four seminars; for this reason, statistical analysis (i.e., analysis of variance) was not required.

Student Writing Sample Rubric

Table 2, below, presents data from the score results of the 15 students who completed the Student Writing Sample.

TABLE 2

WRITING RUBRIC EVALUATION FORM (abridged)

	Superior	**Strong**	**Adequate**	**Marginal**	**Weak**	**Very Weak**
Understanding and use of the assigned reading	Thorough critical understanding; insightful response **0 students**	Sound critical understanding; well-reasoned response **1 student**	Generally accurate under-standing; sensible response **4 students**	Some under-standing; may misconstrue parts [with a] weak response **4 students**	Poor under-Standing; reading not used appropriately; may not use the reading **5 students**	Little or no ability to understand **1 student**
Quality and clarity of thought	Thoughtful and in depth **0 students**	Some depth and complexity **1 student**	Simplistic or repetitive **6 students**	Confused or simplistic thinking **5 students**	Lacks focus and coherence **3 students**	Unfocused and illogical **0 students**
Organization, development, and support	Coherently organized and developed; apt reasons; well-chosen examples **0 students**	Well-organized and developed; ideas supported by appropriate reasons and examples **1 student**	Adequately organized and developed; generally supported with reasons and examples **4 students**	Poorly organized and developed; presents generalizations without support or details without generalizations **4 students**	Weak organization and development; simplistic generalizations with no support **5 students**	Unorganized and undeveloped with no relevant support **1 student**

Table 2 shows that in regards to demonstrating habits of mind, the students overwhelmingly did not perform as well in the writing task as they did in the Socratic seminars. In the "Understanding and use of the assigned reading" criterion, 10 of the 15 students scored in the lower half of the rubric, and even then only 4 students were "adequate" in performance. This means that the students' understanding and use of the assigned text was poor or lacking because they misconstrued parts of the reading or did not understand it to develop a weak response. With regards to "Quality and clarity of thought," 8 students scored below "adequate," meaning that their thinking exemplified that it was confused, simplistic, unfocused, incoherent, or illogical. Finally, 10 of the students scored below "adequate" in "Organization, development, and support." This criterion shows exactly the same numerical results as does the "Understanding" criterion. Clearly, the students had difficulty understanding the reading and organizing their thoughts into a written response.

Socratic Seminars to Enhance Students' Confidence

Qualitative Findings

As with the first research question, qualitative data to address this question were collected using the Student Group Interview, the Student Written Survey Questions, and my own Reflective Teaching Journal. And as mentioned in the Introduction to this chapter, analysis yielded three major themes with respect to how Socratic seminars can be used to enhance students' confidence: *1) Socratic seminars empower students to learn; 2) Socratic seminars are emotionally safe; 3) Socratic seminars create a sense of community.*

Socratic seminars empower students.

The students who participated in the Socratic seminars came to realize the benefits of controlling the discussion themselves, rather than of being controlled by the teacher. This acceptance of control, however, was not immediate, as noted in my reflections. Initially, as students expressed their ideas, they looked at me, as if looking for an affirmation of their thoughts. When the room fell to silence as the others refused to speak, with the class sometimes waiting for as long as three to four minutes for someone to share a comment, heads turned to me. Their eyes questioned, "What next, teacher?" It was not until the fourth seminar when students looked at each other when they spoke. Finally, the students learned that I was not their savior. They were the ones *truly* in charge. If the conversation lagged, it was their responsibility to regenerate the discussion.

In the student interview, I asked the group if this kind of teaching (the Socratic seminar method) had affected their abilities to contribute to a group discussion. One young man related, "Yeah, it did help me to speak up and to discuss with the classmates [because] you actually get more into it than a normal class. People were sharing their opinions and I kind of wanted to give out my opinions as well…In a normal class…people have to raise their hands…to say a comment or the answer. Most people don't want to do that." This young man's comments imply that when students are in control of the discussion, unrestricted by the teacher's authority, they feel more comfortable sharing. Another student conveyed, "In the seminar we could just share our own opinions, and we didn't actually have to hold back or raise our hands…we didn't have to go by turns or by rows. It's better that way." Finally, another wrote, "Socratic seminar gives people a chance to control the situation. For example, someone can change the topic and move it around to a different view or topic."

Indeed, with the students in command of the discussion, some students felt less restricted and took charge of propelling the conversation forward. When students felt comfortable, they wanted to talk. I speculated, in my reflections, that the educational system has trained its students well to seek approval and direction from the teacher. But in this situation, it is clear that students felt that the seminars empowered them to learn by putting them in charge of their learning.

Socratic seminars are emotionally safe.

Many of the students commented on how the seminars improved their confidence because their opinions were valued in a non-judgmental setting. Several students shared comments like, "The biggest fear that anyone has is the fact that their opinion is going to be wrong and someone is going to say something bad about him, or how it wasn't right, but that didn't happen in the seminars. I think that made people a lot more willing to say what they were thinking." Another stated, "Since other people were saying their opinions, then I felt composed speaking mine. Other people were agreeing to it and when people are doing that, everyone accepts their opinion and no one is going to directly criticize it." One insightful student remarked that in a teacher-directed classroom, "You just want to say the right answer, and you're ready for her to say that's right or wrong...and you don't want to say it because you're afraid that you're going to be wrong." Others admitted that now "after Socratic seminars, I'm not as fearful of people saying a negative opinion of what I'm saying...because in Socratic seminar you think everyone's opinion is right because it's according to them." These comments indicate that the students were able to relax and express their views, feeling accepted for their beliefs.

These students' positive responses, however, are tempered by the reality that three students never spoke during the seminars. These students confided that they were just "too shy." Each qualified their written responses saying, "I don't really know what to say," "I had good

ideas...but I just never spoke up, and I wish I did so I would of let people know what I had in mind," and "I was too shy to say something because I think that I may be wrong." Two of these students are second language learners, which may help explain the root of their shyness. Despite my interventions of using colored cards and of grading three of the four seminars to encourage class participation, these students stood firm in their non-participation. The only time they did speak was during the End-of-Seminar Oral Evaluation. Only then did they share an idea that should have been shared during the seminar. Their lack of participation annoyed some students who nicely, but firmly, stated in the circle evaluation that they wanted to hear from everyone because "It's kind of neat to hear what others think." I noted in my reflections that it seems plausible to conclude that shy students need more than four seminars to break out of their shells and need to be exposed to seminars more frequently.

Socratic seminars build a sense of community.

Evident from the student responses during the Student Group Interview and on the Student Written Survey Questions was the emotional bonding felt by the group and the degree to which the students felt comfortable in sharing their thoughts. Several students shared that they "like[d] how all the people from the group...had something to share." Others felt the experience allowed them to connect to their fellow students, "By giving your opinion or hearing someone else's opinion, we can get to know others, and they can get to know a little about us." Still another student said, "It's a good feeling getting to know more about each other and to share what we have in mind." Others corroborated these feelings, such as the one who wrote, "I also liked the Socratic seminars because all of the students in the class got to speak, and many students who[m] I never would have talked to myself voiced their opinions."

These responses are significant because on a normal class day, not much student interaction occurs. Their attention is primarily on me, the teacher, or on the task at hand that they must complete. Even with the cooperative learning activities, little bonding occurs; the participants focus on the task rather than on the one or two other group members, and they are together only for a limited amount of time to complete the task—time much shorter than even one seminar. The fact that so many of the students commented on this topic indicates the importance that it held for the students.

My teacher journal notes also validate the students' reactions. In the second seminar, I noted one complaint voiced during the End-of-Seminar Evaluation. That student wished others would talk so that they [the class members] could get to know them and their ideas. By the last seminar, my notes read, "I felt an undercurrent of harmony in the class," and "The students were truly enjoying sharing their ideas and connecting with each other. My only regret is that the seminar had to come to an end."

It is true that not all students spoke during the seminars, as mentioned. In fact, three students failed to participate in each seminar. What is significant, however, is the positive comments from the non-participants. All three of the non-speakers completed the written survey and responded, as follows, to the question of whether they would recommend this teaching method for other teachers to adopt:

- Student A—"I would recommend it because you can say what you want to say and students really listen."
- Student B—"I would recommend this method of teaching…[because] it would help you think more about the topic and it will give you more ideas about things that others missed when they've read the article."

- Student C—"This method…can get the students [to] focus and concentrate on what one has to…in order to with their opinion. Also, it could help students get to know others and to be confident with what one is saying."

Even though they did not speak, it is clear that these students unequivocally understood the value of Socratic seminars. However, an irony exists as to their responses because if the seminars did possess these benefits for them as they claim, then they should have spoken during the conversations.

Despite the fact that a few students did not participate in each seminar, attendance improved during the course of the four seminars. In the last two seminars, no students were absent compared to two or three absences for the first two seminars suggesting that students at least wanted to be a part of the seminars, even if they did not speak.

Summary

The qualitative data show that when students feel they are in control, fulfilling the role as directors of the discussion; that when students do not feel judged and feel free to voice their opinions; and that when students build a community of learners, then they feel more comfortable about speaking their ideas. Because all of these elements are interrelated, it seems likely that building a student's confidence is a complex process, one as complex as the students themselves, and one that will take time to come to fruition.

Quantitative Findings

Quantitative data to address this question were collected using a Socratic Seminar Grading Rubric. As described in Chapter 3, these data were analyzed by computing tallies for two categories of the instrument, and then using the data to create a chart to illustrate trends or patterns. Those findings are illustrated below.

The number of times each student participated in the Socratic seminars is displayed in Table 3 below, which compares data from the first two seminars with the last two seminars. Data were combined between seminars to facilitate analysis using a paired-samples t-test.

TABLE 3

Student	**Seminars #1 & #2**	**Seminars #3 & #4**
A	3	2
B	12	11
C	13	11
D	3	4
E	4	4
F	1	5
G	12	11
H	1	4
I	8	19
J	9	6
K	7	0
TOTALS	**73**	**77**
AVERAGES	**6.6**	**7**

As can be seen from the table, although a few students greatly increased in participation from the first to the last seminars (e.g., Student I), others did not, and in fact one student (K) participated even less during the last two seminars. Overall, neither the total nor average number

of student participation efforts changed over the course of the four seminars; for this reason, statistical analysis (i.e., paired-samples t-test) was not required.

Summary

In introducing Socratic seminars into my senior English curriculum, I strove to investigate how Socratic seminars might enhance my students' critical thinking skills and build their self-confidence. My findings show that the impact of Socratic seminars on the students' critical thinking skills and their confidence is promising, if only after four seminars. All the students, even those students who did not participate, *felt* the seminars were beneficial to their critical thinking and confidence.

The following chapter summarizes my findings and discusses implications derived from them. It also outlines an action plan for future uses of Socratic seminars with my senior English classes based on those implications, along with my thoughts as to what I learned from this action research project.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND ACTION PLAN

Recognizing my senior high school students' inability to think deeply and their resistance to engaging in activities requiring deep thought, and seeking an inspirational method to tap into their native intellect, I resolved to find a way to rekindle their motivation for learning while also preparing them for college. At the same time, I needed to consider how to strengthen my teaching expertise and my curriculum to facilitate these goals for my students. How best could I help them become better thinkers and more confident as learners? The method I chose was Socratic questioning, also known as Socratic seminars.

The purpose of my research was to investigate *how Socratic seminars could be used to strengthen students' critical thinking skills,* and *how Socratic seminars could be used to enhance students' confidence with respect to their willingness to participate in class.* My students were instructed in how to read a text—focusing on pre-reading and reading strategies useful for college—and then required to read a number of non-fiction texts and to complete various activities to prepare them for the seminars. Once prepared, the class engaged in the seminar, four in total, with the study culminating in the third quarter. The findings revealed that as the students engaged in dialogue, they enjoyed being in command of their learning and believed they gained in critical thinking from the Socratic method of teaching.

In this chapter, I will first discuss the findings of this study with respect to answering the research questions and contextualizing them within the literature review. Finally, using these findings and thoughts on the research to formulate my action plan, I will present my ideas for integrating this study into the educational environment in which I work.

Findings

Critical Thinking

Thanks to Socrates, the Socratic method has existed for over 2400 years, and research documents well the value of posing questions that tap into one's self-knowledge and understanding to develop one's thinking. Socratic seminars require students to think deeply and to exhibit the higher order thinking skills (Adler, 1982; Ball & Brewer, 2000; Polite & Adams, 1996; Roberts & Billings, 1999). Furthermore, several researchers and practitioners speak to the benefits of Socratic seminars because they enhance habits of mind (Lambright, 1995; Marzano, 1992; Tredway, 1995), an opinion corroborated by researchers in the field of critical thinking who agree that critical thinking may be defined by dispositions or *habits of mind* (Ennis, 1987; Marzano, 1988; Nickerson, 1987). It is these habits of mind that can be developed and observed in Socratic seminars, for which reason my own study focused on teaching and learning habits of mind.

Research on Socratic seminars also emphasizes the importance of selecting a text rich in ideas, issues, and values that is open to multiple interpretations, what Adler (1982) refers to as a "text of merit." Implicit in this requirement, then, is that the participants come to seminar prepared with some understandings of the deeper implications of the text (Ball & Brewer, 2000; Copeland, 2005; Gary, 1989; Lambright, 1995). Interestingly, none of the research revealed information on using non-fiction texts from current magazines or newspapers in an English classroom. All of the literature focused on using fiction texts or documents, such as *The Declaration of Independence.* My Socratic seminar participants, then, were required to engage in pre-seminar reading activities to prepare for the dialogues, as indicated in Chapter 4. The Socratic seminar participants valued these activities because they saw this preparatory step of the

seminars as crucial to their being able to contribute insightfully during the discussions. They did not regard this work as "busy work."

The literature does reveal a debate amongst those researchers of critical thinking who dispute the importance of *teaching* critical thinking, claiming that doing so weakens creativity and that children can learn to think innately without having to be taught directly to think critically (Goldman, 1984). Likewise, criticism exists for using Bloom's taxonomy as a guide for teaching critical thinking, saying it eliminates important components of understanding (Lipman, 1987; Ormell, 1974). Few studies, however, dispute the benefit of critical thinking with Socratic seminars, and those are more concerned with the effects on teachers than on Socratic seminar students (Polite & Adams, 1996; Goldman, 1984; Olson, 1990).

In the study, Socratic seminar students appeared to have gained from the Socratic seminars. In particular, students indicated that dialoging about the text helped them to understand text sections they had not understood, or that the conversation drew their attention to text sections they had disregarded. Their understanding of the text was, consequently, expanded and deepened because of the ideas they shared, allowing them to exhibit the behaviors of critical thinking.

Another important implication, though, surfaced. Socratic seminars appear to provide a forum for equalizing students intellectually. That is, because the students led their own discussions and because I (the teacher) did not select the student with his/her hand raised, *everyone* had a fair chance to speak. Everyone's ideas are valuable in promoting the students' understandings of what they read, not just the "smart" students. Hence, everyone contributes to deepening each other's understanding and critical thinking. Furthermore, in the course of the conversations, my students shared personal examples to help explain and connect themselves to the underlying meaning(s) of the text. Those anecdotes and examples helped promote a deeper

understanding of the topic under discussion because the personal examples moved the conversation to a universal level where the students demonstrated the higher order thinking skills, those at the top of Bloom's taxonomy—analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. The students' abilities to extend the conversation improved with each seminar, and by the last seminar, the students were extending the conversation to politics, world issues, and the media—much beyond the personal level. While the qualitative data support the fact that the depth of the comments became deeper and more universal, the data also show that the students' rate of speaking did not grow. For that reason, the results cannot be quantified.

An interesting finding, though, indicates that little correlation exists between students' abilities to speak and to write. Some students who demonstrated improvement in the seminars in their critical thinking by using habits of mind and by connecting their ideas to the texts, and others who scored in the top range consistently on the Socratic Seminar Grading Rubric, did not show the same ability in the Student Writing sample. Some students who were consistently contributing more than four habits of mind in seminars, as well as making connections to the text, scored average ("adequate" on the rubric) to below average ("marginal" and "weak" on the rubric) in the writing sample.

Unfortunately, little literature focuses on the connection of speaking to writing or on any research documenting that speaking is easier than writing, although there are two schools of thought—writing is more complex than speaking, and writing is similar to speaking because of their conversational natures (Liberman, 1992; Roberts & Billings, 2008; Sperling, 1996). Despite this dearth of literature, the results were not surprising. As a teacher of English, and thus of writing, I have experienced situations where students who were adept verbally struggled with writing. Writing presents special challenges that speaking does not. Writing requires that a

student take abstract thoughts and transfer them into concrete form, using words, while being mindful of written language conventions, of writing strategies, and of the structures of the English language. To intensify the problem, the students were asked to write "on demand," requiring them to brainstorm, organize, and write a response in 45 minutes, a skill they had only been introduced to this year and had completed only twice before this exercise. Truly the writing sample required the students to juggle many more skills than the speaking required. In retrospect, using a writing task to assess and measure skills taught and learned through reading and speaking, especially after just four seminars, is probably not authentic. For the future, I would suggest either relying more heavily on the Socratic seminar rubric, and/or working more intensely on helping seminar students prepare to engage in this type of writing task.

With the present-day requirements that classroom curriculum to be aligned to the standards, connecting the Socratic seminar experience to the writing standards is not only beneficial for the students but advisable for teachers. Copeland (2005) and Ball & Brewer (2000) offer a myriad of follow-up activities for infusing writing into Socratic seminar lessons that require students to synthesize and evaluate the content and the skills they explored in their seminars. In using one or more of these activities, teachers will strengthen the connection of speaking and writing in their students so that the students may express themselves critically in writing as well as in speaking.

Self-Confidence

Much of the literature espouses the affective benefits of Socratic seminars, specifically how seminars improve the participant's confidence (Adler, 1982; Strong, 1996; Paul, 1990; Gray, 1989), along with engendering equality and a feeling of empowerment with learning; very few studies disagree (Goldman, 1984; Burgess, 1990; Guinier, Fine, and Balin, 1997, cited in Rud, 1997). The results of my study support the idea that Socratic seminars can enhance self-

confidence. My students, overwhelmingly, responded eagerly to the opportunity of sitting in a circle and talking. Despite this apparent enthusiasm, the data showed no significant difference, statistically, in the number of times students spoke, yet the students *believed* they grew in their ability to speak up during seminars. Their belief can be attributed, in part, to the fact that the students were in charge of their discussions. While initially the discussion fell into periods of silence, the students soon realized that they were truly in charge because the teacher did not intervene to fill the silence, and the conversation took the direction they desired because of their comments, not because of the teacher's comments. Of course as the seminars progressed, the lapses of silence waned.

Still, the students displayed a behavior that became difficult to curtail and speaks to the issue of confidence, if not also habit. That is, as the students spoke, they insisted on looking at me, the teacher, as if seeking approval of their thoughts. I attempted to divert their looks by looking down or looking at other students, but the students seemed unable to ignore my silent presence, except for the occasional guiding question I posed. This behavior of seeking approval from the teacher is, most likely, attributable to students' extensive experience with an often-used method of pedagogy, the Scholar Academic model, where the teacher is the "sage on the stage." By the 12th grade, the students "know" the system that teachers use and have come to expect it.

Related to the issue of students "pre-conditioned" to expect teachers to manage and dictate classroom learning is the finding that students in the Socratic seminar nonetheless were able to relax and express their views. They felt accepted for their beliefs because they did not fear being judged wrong by the teacher or by their peers because *everyone's* ideas were accepted, not just the "smart student's" answers. Even though many teachers encourage students to share their ideas, even if they are wrong, students usually do not feel safe doing so. With questions like

"What will the others think?" "What will the teacher think?" "Shouldn't I know the answer?" coursing through their minds, silence becomes their safe haven. For these students, the seminar experiences proved to be ones that changed their views on their roles in the learning process. They were now willing to take more risks and were willing to express their thoughts. What is important to remember, though, is that though the number of students who spoke did not grow, those who did speak, spoke more often and with more ease.

Disappointing was the fact that three students *never* spoke during the seminars. As mentioned in Chapter 4, I employed several strategies to encourage these individuals to speak, but to no avail. Nevertheless, all three of these students wrote glowingly about the benefits of the Socratic method, but they said the reason they did not speak was that they were "just too shy." The fact that two of the three students were former second-language learners could partially explain their reluctance to speak. It seems likely to conclude that these students fretted over expressing their thoughts well and worried whether or not their comments would be "right." Also, their reticence speaks to the idea that a teacher's strategies sometimes can be powerless against the human will. Learning involves a dual responsibility between the teacher and the student; both have to be willing parties for full benefit. In the case of these three seminar students, some learning did occur according to the seminar students themselves, but their inability to participate fully in the seminars limited what they could gain through their participation.

Overall

By the conclusion of the last seminar, the students were bonding as a class and as a community of students. They genuinely seemed to enjoy discussing timely issues—intelligently—with one another. They seemed relaxed, willing to disagree with each other, and

extended their comments beyond one curt statement to several statements that included personal experiences, connections to the media, politics, and society in general. The fact that conclusive, positive results were not apparent suggests that four seminars are not enough to hone critical thinking skills or to build the self-confidence of the unconfident to a quantitatively measureable level. Nonetheless, the students did feel that they gained from these experiences.

Action Plan

Initially, the thoughts of conducting Socratic seminars filled me with trepidation; too many "what if's" swirled about in my head. Swallowing my fear, though, I resolved to leave my comfort zone and do what would benefit my students, not me. Witnessing my students' enthusiasm and their growth, though admittedly modest because of only four seminars, I am convinced that I must continue transforming my instruction by using the Socratic method.

Because of the success of the pre-reading and reading preparatory activities I used with the students, I will continue to use this pedagogical approach with the senior English classes. The students stated they felt these steps prepared them well for the seminars, and the activities required them to practice reading strategies that they will use in the future to navigate through their college course work. In addition, I plan to do more instruction initially to emphasize the differences between a seminar/dialogue and a discussion and seminar/dialogue and a debate. This step is crucial because of one colleague who uses debate in his curriculum, and the students see a debate and a seminar as one-in-the-same method.

As I continue with infusing Socratic seminars into my curriculum, I must increase the frequency of the seminars. Ideally, I would like to hold a seminar semimonthly, approximately every two weeks, but realistically I may be able to hold a seminar only once a month. Approximately two weeks' lead-time is needed to prepare the class properly for a seminar using

two or three short non-fiction texts. Keeping in mind the various other obligations mandated by the school site, the school district, and the state, my lead-time could well extend to over three-plus weeks. From my experience with my thesis project, I know that the preparatory steps are critical for the students' understanding of the readings and must not be abridged for the sake of increasing the number of seminars. I must find a balance between both concerns.

Because the students demonstrated a discrepancy between their abilities to think critically in speaking as opposed to writing, I will infuse more post-seminar writing strategies into my curriculum. These activities might include a quickwrite, a reflective writing focused on what the students learned through the Socratic seminar (see Appendix 10), journaling about their participation in the seminar, and/or creating a thesis statement for an imaginary essay. By requiring the students to write down their thoughts, to make their ideas concrete, the students may be able to articulate their ideas more easily in writing. Additionally, more instruction and practice with timed writes would address additional issues, such as time management and organizing their writing, not directly related to critical thinking.

To address the issue of reluctant speakers, I will actively seek and experiment with various strategies, already discussed in this chapter, to motivate the shy speakers to speak up during the seminars. Together with the added number of seminars, I feel these students will eventually share their thoughts.

Members of the English Department at my high school have already voiced an interest in learning more about Socratic seminars. One of my colleagues has used Socratic seminars for over 20 years, and she has just created a video on Socratic seminars for a technology class assignment. My plan for the future is for the two of us to develop a workshop and train our colleagues, combining both of our talents in the Socratic method. The workshop might be

structured in two parts. In Session 1, the history and structure of Socratic seminars might be presented in a PowerPoint presentation and in a video, with time allotted for teachers to practice writing opening, core, and closing questions. Session 2 might be devoted to teachers practicing how to lead and participate in a seminar. I would feel proud to present the pedagogy of Socratic questioning to teachers seeking to improve their skills so that their students are better equipped as learners.

Finally, all of these plans are conceived with my resolve of being the best teacher I can be—always questioning, reflecting, and desiring to hone my craft of teaching. Understanding these limitations and conscientiously addressing each one will allow me to encourage each student to participate and to deepen critical thinking while fostering self-confidence. Striving for these goals will ensure a democratic classroom where all students feel empowered to learn.

Limitations, Recommendations, and Final Words

Though my findings delineate mostly the positive aspects of my study, I must acknowledge the limitations of this research. The participants were a small group of only 18 senior English students, a smaller group than the "normal" class size of 34 to 36 students. The class, in addition, took on the nature of a "revolving door," whereby three students dropped and two students added during the course of the study. This movement narrowed the number of students from whom I had to collect complete data. Because of the instability of the class, one month into the study I had to re-teach what Socratic seminars were so as to have everyone "on the same page." Because of time constraints, and at risk of boring those who had already heard the presentation, I delivered an edited version of the lesson. I grew concerned that this abridged introduction would hinder the results of the study because students were joining the study already in progress. It did not appear to do so.

Second, the study itself was brief, spanning four months with four seminars. I had originally planned a seminar every two to three weeks, but the dictates of my school precluded me from progressing faster. Furthermore, the preparatory phase of the seminar—the pre-reading and reading activities—required more time than anticipated because the students were unskilled in some of the activities, thus requiring more interventions so they could complete the steps satisfactorily to be prepared for the seminar. The thoughts recorded in my teacher reflective journal on that last day of seminar lament that just as the class was showing progress, it was time to conclude the project. One seminar approximately every four weeks is not enough practice with this method.

Third, though none of the literature speaks of using strategies to encourage students' participation in the seminars, such as using colored cards to regulate the students' speaking, I am thankful I used these. I borrowed this idea from a colleague. However, the cards needed to be used in more seminars than just the first one. The students grumbled about using these with the first seminar, but one student on the written survey suggested that students be given "speech cards" or even "sticks" to help encourage the quiet ones to speak. Another student suggested that silent students might participate if the first question were answered around the circle, thereby triggering the silent students' habits of mind. Whatever the choice strategy might be, it is clear that as the teacher, I should not feel I need to limit its use only to the first Socratic seminar.

Finally, as a teacher, my students are my clients. I am responsible to them. I want them to learn. I want to be dynamic. Socratic seminars have validated my beliefs as a teacher—*learning* can occur in student-centered situations *and* be engaging. Additionally, the very nature of Socratic seminars promotes social justice. Empowering students with their learning, allowing them to compete on equal footing with one another, and providing them with a forum to

exchange ideas with an open mind to changing their own beliefs are benefits of Socratic seminars. As one of my students wrote, "I would definitely recommend this teaching method [Socratic seminars] to other students [and teachers] at my school. Socratic seminars are the most fun I've had in my English class all year." It is one other student's comment, however, that gives me hope for my students' educational future, "I had never done anything like this in any class of mine. It was a really great experience that has helped me in many different ways." What more precious gift can a teacher give to her students than to empower them with their learning? Clearly, there is no other!

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Description of Pre-Reading and Reading Activities and Outcomes

The students initially read the required readings, following the reading process, and with teacher guidance prepared for the Socratic seminars by completing various activities, including a graphic organizer for each reading. Below is an identification of the outcomes:

Reading of the texts—

- Students employed pre-reading strategies: making personal connections (journal write, anticipatory guide), surveying the text, making predictions, and asking questions.

- Students read the first paragraph to determine the topic of the article and the author's opinion on the topic, and turned the title into a question to be answered at the end of the reading.

- Students completed pre-reading vocabulary activities to familiarize themselves with the vocabulary of the readings.

- Students, as they read, annotated the texts by highlighting or underlining the text, as well as writing marginalia. They determined each author's thesis; located important ideas or statements of the author; circled or highlighted important/key words or phrases; wrote questions; and noted any passages that were not understood.

- Students participated in a teacher-led "debriefing" session. Using a transparency of the article and an overhead projector, I led the class in validating the annotation the students prepared from their first reading of the text by annotating the article with the students, based on their annotations. I only completed this more thorough step with the first of the assigned readings. With the second/third reading(s), the students were asked to practice what they had learned previously and were solely responsible for their annotations. This reading's annotations were briefly discussed to answer questions, clarify any confusion, and to validate the essentials elements of the author's thesis and to validate the author's thesis and important ideas, but the article was not annotated together with the class as with the first reading.

Second reading of the texts—

- Students re-read the text for the essay's structure; the author's main arguments/ideas; the author's examples; and the author's use of rhetorical devices.

- Students engaged in vocabulary activities for the vocabulary from the readings.

- Students participated in a teacher-led discussion of the elements the students identified in their re-reading of the text (as noted above).

- Students completed a "Sequential Flow Chart" to identify the authors' arguments and their support for two readings only: "Tattoos are today's way to establish identity" and for "The Weak Shall Inherit the Gym." This activity was an intervention because students were experiencing difficulty identifying the arguments and its corresponding evidence.

Preparation for the Socratic seminar—

- The students completed a "Graphic Organizer for Socratic Seminar" for each of the readings. For the first reading, each item on the sheet was discussed in class and validated for accuracy. For the second and third articles, the discussion was brief and only focused on the author's opinion and purpose and on the arguments and support. The reason for this deviation is that I wanted the students to assume more responsibility for the content of this exercise in the second/third text(s) than they had with the first text, thereby encouraging them to apply their critical reading skills.

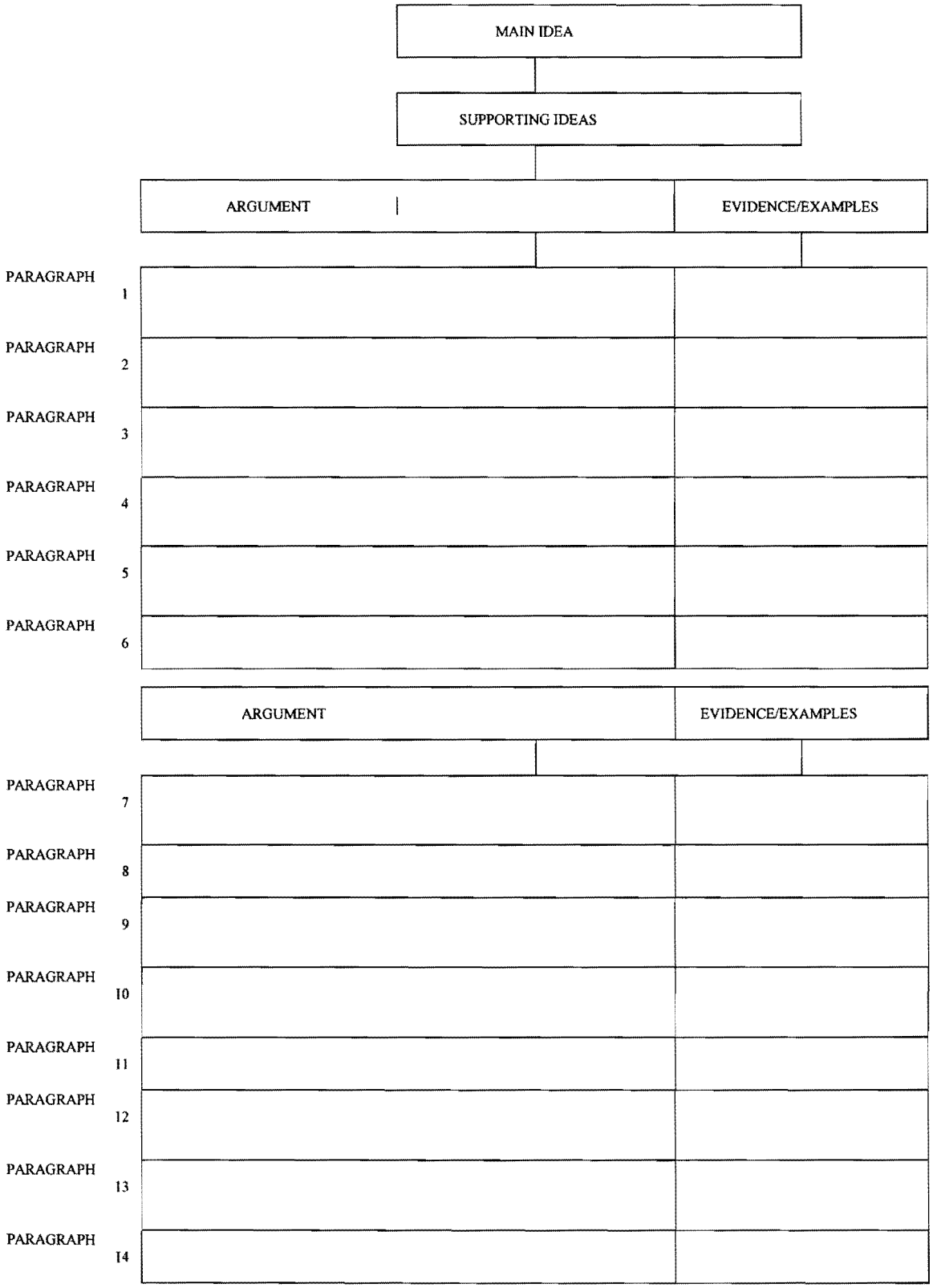
- Students wrote short reflective responses to thought-provoking quotes or statements from the texts to stimulate their thoughts on the text and topic. These responses were assigned periodically as homework and shared in a brief session the following day(s).

Preparation for the First Socratic Seminar

Because the students were not familiar with the Socratic seminar method, it was necessary to prepare the students with foundational information on this discussion method. On the first preparatory day, I delivered a PowerPoint presentation on the history of the Socratic seminar method, including what the components are and how the seminar works. This presentation was followed by a brief discussion of the main points and provided an opportunity for students to ask questions. In the next class session, I showed the video, *How To Conduct Successful Socratic Seminars* (ASCD, 1998) that addressed the climate and expectations, the room arrangement, the opening question, the grounding of the seminar discussion in a text, the teacher as a facilitator, and the role of the students. Following the video, I conducted a brief debriefing of the main points addressed and asked for questions to clarify any misunderstandings the students gleaned from the video, emphasizing to the students what their responsibilities were for the seminar.

In addition, I prepared a transparency of the essential agreements for the Socratic seminar and displayed them the overhead projector for the class to discuss and modify, as desired. The final list included: Be attentive, be respectful, be a thinker, and engage in no side conversations. Finally, I distributed a green card with a list of six "response stems" that students could refer to, to frame their responses to each other. The class was now prepared for the Socratic seminar to be held the next day.

Appendix 2: Sequential Flow Chart



Appendix 3: Graphic Organizer for Socratic Seminar

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER FOR SOCRATIC SEMINAR

Article title: _____

Author's name: _____

Source and Date: _____

Topic: _____

DIRECTIONS: Thoughtfully answer the following questions.

1. Briefly, what is the article about?

2. What is the author's purpose for writing the article?

3. What is the author's opinion on the topic?

4. What are the author's main points/arguments? List each one.

5. What is the author's support for each point?

6. List 3 key words or phrases. Explain what each means.

7. Select one significant quote and explain what it means.

8. From this reading, what is relevant to your life and to society?

Appendix 4: Response Stems

1. I agree with _____ when he/she says _____ because as the text says ....
2. I disagree with _____ when he/she says _____ because as the text says ...
3. Though I agree with _____ about _____, I also feel/believe that ....
4. Though I disagree with much that _____ says about _____, I do agree with his/her comment that _____ because ...
5. Though I concede that _____, I still insist that _____ ...
6. On the one hand, I agree with _____ that _____. But on the other hand, I still insist that _____.

Appendix 5: Socratic Seminar Grading Rubric

SOCRATIC SEMINAR GRADING RUBRIC

Total Points: 25 points possible in each section = 100 points **POINTS:** _____

A. NUMBER OF COMMENTS: How often did you speak? Did you interrupt people? Did you look at the students or the teacher? [You will lose points if you are talking while others are speaking.]

No comments	**1 comment**	**2 comments**	**3 comments**	**4+ comments**
(0 pts.)	(9 pts.)	(10 pts.)	(12 pts.)	(13 pts.)
Interrupted or looked 4+ times	**several times**	**two times**	**one time**	**never**
(0 pts.)	(8 pts.)	(9 pts.)	(10 pts.)	(12 pts.)

B. QUALITY OF COMMENTS: A quality comment offers a new idea not yet expressed, or the comment takes a new approach to previously stated ideas and the comment applies the habits of mind.

Does not comment	**repeat others' comments**	**1-2 original ideas expressed**	**several original ideas expressed reasons**	**deep comments, new ideas,**
(0 pts.)	(16 pts.)	19 pts.)	(22 pts.)	(25 pts.)

C. TEXT REFERENCE: Examples/evidence from texts, notes, and video. Uses them during the Socratic seminar. Refers to them for evidence. Evidence and example are essential to your grade and are a habit of mind you should have. Use the texts for your evidence.

No text references	**1 reference to text**	**2 references to text**	**3 references to text**	**4+ references to text**
(0 pts.)	(19 pts.)	(21 pts.)	(23 pts.)	(25 pts.)

D. HABITS OF MIND: Repeats the question in the answer, gives evidence, states connections to other topics, states the significance of what you are saying, "what if," states the other side, and is obvious in the use of these habits of mind.

No habits of mind	**1 habit of mind**	**2 habits of mind**	**3 habits of mind**	**4+ habits of mind**
(0 pts.)	(19 pts.)	(21 pts.)	(23 pts.)	(25 pts.)

Appendix 6: Student Group Interview Questions

STUDENT GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. Do you think this method of teaching helped you understand the content and implications of the materials you read? Why or why not?

2. Do you think that this method of teaching helped you, or hindered you, to think more critically about the articles you read? Why or why not? Please provide specific examples.

3. Do you think this type of teaching has helped you to understand better how an author uses rhetorical devices in writing? If so, how? If not, why not?

4. Do you think this type of teaching helped you have more confidence in sharing your own thoughts in a group? How did it help, or why did it not help?

5. Do you think that your ability to contribute to a group discussion has changed in any way as a result of this kind of teaching? How, or how not?

6. How has this type of teaching and learning affected your willingness to leave your "comfort zone" when learning?

Appendix 7: Student Written Survey Questions

SOCRATIC SEMINAR
STUDENT WRITTEN SURVEY QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions as completely and thoughtfully as you can. I appreciate your taking the time to give me as much feedback as possible. Use binder paper to respond to these questions.

1. What do you like best about the Socratic seminar method?

2. What do you like least about the Socratic seminar method?

3. If you spoke during the seminars, what helped you to speak up?
If you did not speak up, what kept you from speaking? Could anything have been done to help you speak up?

4. As a result of our four seminars, do you feel your ability to think critically, to use ***habits of the mind (give evidence, state connections to other topics, state the significance of what you are saying, state "what if" situations, state the other side),*** has improved? If yes, why? If no, why not? Please be specific.

5. Why would you recommend, or not recommend, this teaching method for other teachers to adopt? Please be specific as to reasons.

6. Use the space below to tell me anything else you wish to about your experience with Socratic seminars.

Appendix 8: Writing Evaluation Form

	Superior	Strong	Adequate	Marginal	Weak	Very Weak	Comments
Response to the topic	Addresses the topic clearly and responds effectively to all aspects of the task.	Addresses the topic clearly, but may respond to some aspects of the task more effectively than others.	Addresses the topic but may slight some aspects of the task.	Distorts or neglects aspects of the task.	Indicates confusion about the topic or neglects important aspects of the task.	Suggests an inability to comprehend the question or to respond meaningfully to the topic.	
Understanding and use of the assigned reading	Demonstrates a thorough critical understanding of the assigned reading in developing an insightful response.	Demonstrates a sound critical understanding of the assigned reading in developing a well-reasoned response.	Demonstrates a generally accurate understanding of the assigned reading in developing a sensible response.	Demonstrates some understanding of the assigned reading but may misconstrue parts of it or make limited use of it in developing a weak response.	Demonstrates very poor understanding of the main points of the assigned reading. Does not use the reading appropriately in developing a response.	Demonstrates little or no ability to understand the assigned reading or to use it in developing a response.	
Quality and clarity of thought	Explores the issues thoughtfully and in depth.	Shows some depth and complexity of thought.	May treat the topic the topic simplistically or repetitively.	Lacks focus or demonstrates confused or simplistic thinking.	Lacks focus and coherence or often fails to communicate ideas.	Is unfocused, illogical, or incoherent,	
Organization, development, and support	Is well organized and developed, with ideas supported by apt reasons and well-chosen examples.	Is organized and developed, with ideas supported by appropriate reasons and examples.	Is adequately organized and developed, generally supporting ideas with reasons and examples.	Is poorly organized and developed, presenting generalizations without adequate support or details without generalizations.	Has weak organization and development, providing simplistic generalizations without support.	Is disorganized and undeveloped, providing little or no relevant support.	
Syntax and command of language	Has an effective, fluent style marked by syntactic variety and a clear command of the language.	Displays some syntactic variety and facility in the use of language.	Demonstrates adequate use of syntax and language.	Has limited control of syntax and vocabulary.	Has inadequate control of syntax and vocabulary.	Lacks basic control of syntax and vocabulary.	
Grammar, usage, and mechanics	Is generally free from errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.	May have a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.	May have some errors but generally demonstrates control of grammar, usage, and mechanics.	Has an accumulation of errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics that sometimes interfere with meaning.	Is marred by numerous errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics that frequently interfere with meaning.	Has serious and persistent errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics that severely interfere with meaning.	

Appendix 9: Tally for Student Writing Sample Grading Rubric

Evaluation Form for Timed Write

	Superior	Strong	Adequate	Marginal	Weak	Very Weak
Under-Standing and use of the assigned reading	*Thorough* critical understand-ing of the reading in developing an *insightful* response	*Sound* critical under-standing of the reading in developing a *well-reasoned* response	*Generally accurate* under-standing of the reading in developing a *sensible* response	*Some* under-standing of the reading but *may mis-construe* parts or uses *limitedly* in developing a *weak* response	*Poor* under-standing of the main points of the reading. Reading *not used appropri-ately* in develop-ing a response	*Little or no ability* to understand the reading or *use it* in develop-ing a *response*
		(1)	(4)	(4)	(5)	(1)
Quality and Clarity of thought	Explores issues *thoughtfully* and *in depth*	Shows *some depth* and *complexity* of thought	May treat the topic *simplistic-ally* or *repetitively*	*Lacks focus* or demon-strates *confused* or *simplistic* thinking	*Lacks focus and coherence* and *often fails* to communi-cate ideas	Is *unfocused, illogical,* or *incoherent*
		(1)	(5)	(6)	(3)	
Development And support	Ideas supported by *apt reasons* and *well-chosen examples*	Ideas supported by *appropri-ate reasons* and *examples*	Ideas *generally* supported with reasons and examples	Generali-zations presented *without adequate support* or details *without generali-zations*	*Weak* develop-ment, providing *simplistic generali-zations without support*	*Undevel-oped,* providing *little or no relevant support*
		(1)	(3)	(5)	(5)	(1)

Appendix 10: Sample Reflective Paper for Socratic Seminars

REFLECTIVE PAPER FOR SOCRATIC SEMINARS

DIRECTIONS: You are responsible for a two-page, typed, single-spaced reflection on your experience with the Socratic seminar. Your reflection will be comprised of four parts: (1) Reflection on what you learned; (2) Ideas you were not able to share during the dialogue; (3) Reflection on the articles' contents; and (4) Vocabulary.

1. Reflect on what you learned during the seminar: What did you learn about the topic? What did you learn about your classmates? What did you learn about yourself?

2. Share your ideas—What ideas were you not able to share during the seminar? Identify at least two ideas and explain your thinking? If you cannot remember, go back to your Socratic seminar graphic organizers for help.

3. Reflect on the articles' contents—Include a response(s) for each of the following bullets:

    - Answer the questions you wrote for the titles of the articles.
    - What are three main points the authors make in their articles?
    - How did the authors' opinions on the topic compare and/or contrast? Be specific by giving at least two examples (quotes) with explanation/commentary.
    - What connections do you make between your personal experiences and the ideas the authors present in their articles?

4. List *at least* three words from the text selections that you either were unfamiliar with when you first read the articles or words that you felt your understanding of changed over the course of the Socratic seminar lesson. For each word, include:

    - the part of speech for the word as it is used in context.
    - the dictionary definition for the word as it is used in the context of the sentence.
    - Two or three sentences describing how your understanding of the word developed or changed during the Socratic seminar lesson.

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